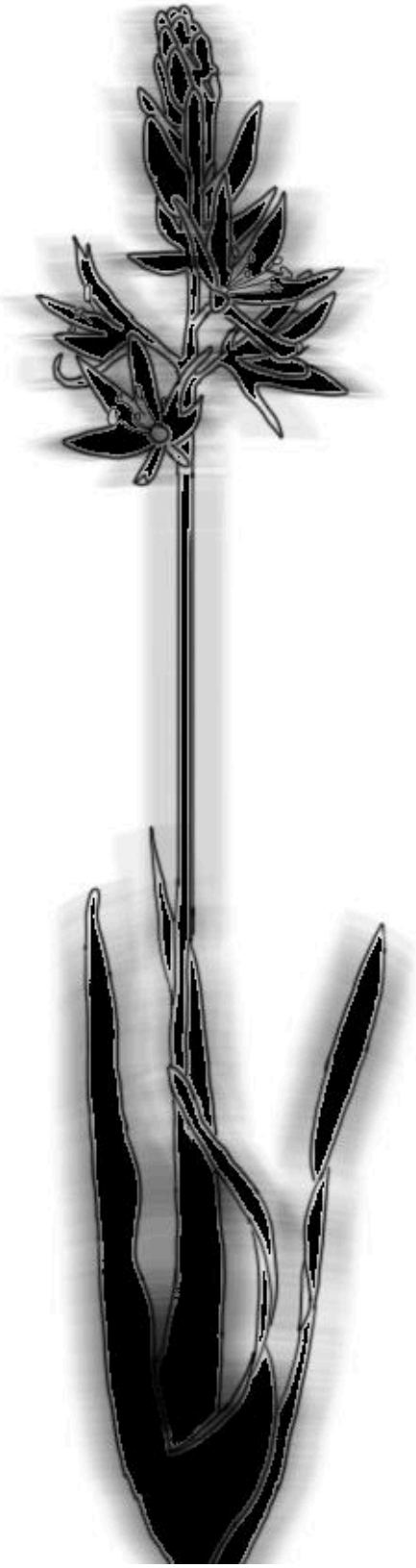

Camassia, commonly called camas, is a genus of six bulb-forming species, all of which produce striking white, blue, or purple flowers on upright stems in the springtime. These plants are found across North America from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific Northwest, but are most abundant in the Pacific Northwest where four of the six species still paint meadows in shades of purple and blue.

For many indigenous peoples of North America, camas was not only beautiful, it was essential. Its starchy bulbs, roasted in earthen ovens for days, were a staple food. Its flowers were heralded as the retreat of winter. It shaped seasonal rounds and the rhythm of life. Tribes across the present-day western U.S.—including the Chinookan, Kalapuyan, Nêhiyawak (Cree), Nimíipuu (Nez Perce), Niitsitapi (Blackfoot), Paiute, Salish, and Shoshone peoples—cultivated and stewarded camas meadows through careful selection and deliberate burning. Soil core records from Oregon show this practice extending back at least four thousand years.

This abundance and Indigenous significance left its mark even in settler culture: there are towns named after the plant in four U.S. states and an entire Camas County in Idaho. A handful of remaining camas prairies have even been protected; a recognition of their ecological value, but also the layered human histories they hold. Lewis and Clark famously wrote of being offered camas to eat by the Nimíipuu in an act of Indigenous hospitality.

Here I want to focus on one species, *Camassia quamash*, also called common camas or, in Shoshone, *pasigo*, a name which long predates the botanical Latin. This species today ranges from southern Canada to the central Sierra Nevada on the west and Utah and Wyoming on the east. While on paper it remains relatively widespread and abundant, this obscures a deeper truth: camas meadows have been decimated. When settlers arrived, camas meadows were viewed not as the Indigenous farms they were, but as prime agricultural land, sitting empty, waiting to be exploited. Wars were sparked over the destruction of camas meadows by settlers as Indigenous food systems and sovereignty came under fire. As a result of this sordid history, the true extent of camas before settlement is unknowable. But it is certainly far scarcer now than it once was.

In Utah, the fate of camas mirrors not only an interruption of cultural practices and indigenous land management, but also the collapse of ecological processes. Here, camas is a plant of wet places, like seeps, creeks, and snow-fed meadows. But settler land management, particularly in the Mormon project, treated water as the central asset of their stolen promised land. Rivers were dammed. Creeks were channelized and siphoned off in service of agriculture. In the valleys of the Wasatch Front where poor soils prevailed, wetlands were drained to make way for cropland. Entire hydrologies were dismantled in the rush to cultivate and control.

We may never know the full extent of the loss from this blitz of colonization. The Mormon settlers left few ecological records. What we have are scattered historic accounts: grass so tall you could lose livestock in it; a Utah Lake teeming with fish so abundant that you could grab one with your bare hands. These glimpses betray a vastly different Wasatch Front than the rapidly aridifying, pollution-poisoned corridor that exists today.

Today, camas persists in a handful of scattered sites across northern Utah, mostly on the Wasatch Back and in Cache Valley. These remnants congregate mostly in high places where snowmelt abounds and spring is a long, drawn-out process. Through a modern lens, you'd be forgiven for thinking camas was at home in the high country. But that image is incomplete.

Snow no longer lingers in the valleys of the Wasatch Front. The canyon creeks of the Salt Lake Valley, once braided in green, are now buried in concrete. Summer temperatures regularly climb into the triple digits in Salt Lake City, a decidedly modern phenomenon. And yet, camas leaves traces. One small population persists, on a valley bench tucked in the suburbs, where snow might have once drifted deep. Herbarium records tell an even quieter story: there's a specimen collected in 1881 in Farmington at 4,300 feet, barely above Great Salt Lake. Another, the only from Salt Lake County, mid-20th century, reads: "in wet meadow E of Salt Lake City, Utah which is right now being covered with freeway concrete."

And all of this leads me to that valley bench where camas still grows… to dig. I take no pleasure in uprooting, no joy in interrupting a quiet display perched above a scene I imagine camas might see as desolation: suburban sprawl. I'd seen plenty of it on my journey to get here, the sorts of neighborhoods where the human spirit rots in service of property values, in houses decked in 4th of July pageantry. This land, the rightful inheritance of the Goshute and Shoshone, occupied by people who look like me.

As I make my way from the car to my destination, my mind wanders. Who tended these plants before? Where do I fit into the lineage of people who have cared about these camas meadows? This population has surely persisted here since time immemorial. I look out at Great Salt Lake, a feeble, disappearing remnant of the once great Lake Bonneville, and I wonder if camas saw the retreat of those waters from its perch on the old shoreline. It could've witnessed dozens of earthquakes, each its own cataclysm. It had likely seen fire and flood. But none of these had moved it.

What brought me here was not an arrogant desire to displace them the way my ancestors had displaced their stewards. No, it was bulldozers. Graders. The signature loops and lollipops, the dead ends of car-dependent life. Suburban development. The forward march of progress had crept closer and closer to this place over two centuries, the camas watching over

the slow advance, and it had finally arrived. Approaching these meadows perched on the edge of oblivion, I'd seen the signs: two-tracks traced their way across the bench, and a lone fire hydrant stood guard at an intersection traced into the dirt, quietly heralding the end.

As I trudge closer, sagebrush gives way to rush and tarweed, and perhaps unsurprisingly, these meadows are on life support. Bulbous bluegrass fills every crevice of bare ground. Chicory reaches its skeletal stems skyward. The air has gone still here, as if the place is bracing for its own demise. As the Sun drags low in the sky, it feels like I've crossed a threshold, stepped outside of time itself. For half the length of the first meadow, everything is choked out by sulphur cinquefoil. Half of the camas, carried forward through millennia, replaced by a Eurasian invader in the span of a decade in some kind of macabre botanical reenactment. My mind begins to race: what if it's already gone?

I press on, hoping against hope that this won't be all I find. As the shockwave of sulphur cinquefoil fades into something better resembling what this place would have once been, camas finally surfaces. Tens of stems, dried by the sweltering June, bearing hard-won seeds. Even in the midst of megadrought, with bulldozers on one side and sulphur cinquefoil on the other, it had carried on.

Looking down at the remnants, I begin to question my motives. Who am I to come to this place to disrupt a process that began before my bloodline even knew this continent *existed?* Is this restorative justice or self-aggrandizing hubris?

I remind myself that these seeds won't fall on nurturing soil—not for much longer, if they even could now. This meadow, in its entirety, will soon be wiped clean, turned over to make way for white picket fences and F-150s. I quietly beg forgiveness, or permission, or something to ease the ache of this. And I begin to work, digging under stems, fighting through drought-parched ground, carefully bagging the stems, separating them from their bulbs, preserving these genes which aren't long for the world. *Every seed an opportunity,* I tell myself.

An opportunity for what? Sweat drips down my face. Dirt clings under my fingernails, cakes my hands. The setting Sun takes the edge off the heat. The last licks of light fade from the bulb in my hand. It's just as well this is done in the dark.

The bulbs, the seeds—I have designs for them. Futures that might offer more stability than this. Camas meadows where they might join long-estranged cousins. Restoration projects which might one day reinstate camas as queen of the valley, lining every canyon creek. Tribal nations, to whom these truly belong, if they'll have them. This won't redeem anyone, least of all me. But letting this meadow die felt like its own rupture, another tear in a fabric already worn

precariously thin. If there can be some reunion at the end of this, whether with their stewards or with other survivors, maybe I'll be able to sleep at night.

Maybe.